



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Dinner”

Part III of the Summer Sermon Series, “Hidden Treasure.”

Luke 14:13-24

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We are now in week three of our sermon series on the parables of Jesus. We’ve listened to stories from Matthew and Mark, and today we arrive here in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14. Jesus has been sitting at a great dinner at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. Often, the gospels present situations like these with the Pharisees questioning Jesus, but this time Jesus is the one doing the questioning. He has them on their toes, criticizing their habits of social climbing, their tendency to only invite their friends and rich neighbors. He says to them,

¹³ When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

¹⁵ One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” ¹⁶ Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷ At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ ¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ ¹⁹ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ ²⁰ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ ²¹ So the slave returned and reported this



to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²² And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³ Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴ For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'

Musical artist Drake, in the music video for his song "God's Plan," presents what is to me a bit of a parable in its own right. The video opens on a simple, silent black screen that reads, "The budget for this video was \$996,631.90. We gave it all away."

The rest of the video is footage of people in Miami receiving gifts from Drake. He buys groceries for families. He pays for college scholarships. He hands out a giant stack of cash to a single mom trying to make ends meet. He gets 15 passenger vans for a youth center. A donation to the fire department and a struggling local church. Toys for underprivileged children. A shopping trip for homeless women. Cars for people who need transportation. Funding for afterschool programs. And the list goes on and on. Drake said the video is the most important thing he's ever done in his career.

Some said it was a publicity stunt, and maybe it was. But still, I can't watch it without weeping.

What gets me is the idea that honor and fame don't have to be hoarded. That joy is not a limited resource: joy expands when it is shared. The idea that a person can use their influence to bring dignity to others, to be inclusive of others, especially those you might not expect.

It's that same expansion of dignity and welcome that's at the center of our parable today. Jesus is sitting in the midst of a particular group of leaders who have structured their lives around a culture of honor and shame. They're a little too worked up about who sits where, and which names are on the guest list. Jesus sees their competition, their angling for a better seat, and says, "No. That is not what the kingdom is like."

He tells a story, about a guy just like them, someone who has bought into this system of honor and reward based on social standing. The man is clearly wealthy, and he invites, as expected, his clearly wealthy friends. But something goes wrong. The system stops working for him. The invitations he extended as a means of accruing honor and future invitations for himself are rejected. The plan backfires. In their culture, rejection like this would mean real consequences for his future social standing and viability as a respected member of the community.

So he's faced with the collapse of his entire social world, and he has a choice. The dinner is ready now. What is he going to do with it?



The host sends his slave out to the town to bring in all the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And then, when there is still room, he sends him out again to the roads and lanes, to compel them to come, because what he wants most of all is for the house to be full.

As we read this parable, it's tempting to look for the allegory, the easy interpretation, perhaps the one where God plays the role of the host, and we play the role of the invited guests. Read this way, the message is clear: make sure you stay on the guest list. But the trouble with this interpretation is that the host doesn't actually come off looking very good. The host looks kind of like a social climbing snob, who doesn't have any real friends, and who only invites the people off the street as a last resort, even though Jesus just said that's who a godly person would've invited first.

So, we might look at it a different way.

Maybe *we* are best represented by the host, who starts out looking for an opportunity to climb the social ladder. Maybe we too need to be disillusioned of our trust in the fickle social systems of our culture. Maybe we too are called to have a similar change of heart, where we move from only seeing value in the people who look and think like us, to seeing that actually, we find God in being with people who are different from us. We find God in the poor and the oppressed. We find God when we sit at the table next to someone from a completely different experience of the world and say, "Isn't it amazing that God wants us both."

The goal, I think, is not to see ourselves as any one *character* in the story. The goal is to see ourselves in the *process*, the process of moving away from self-centered desires toward kingdom-centered desires, away from exclusion and toward invitation, toward acknowledging that even when it doesn't make sense to us, there is always more room at God's table. God wants the house to be full.

If this parable stood on its own, there might be more ambiguity in its meaning. But Jesus tells this story to leaders, people who have power in their community, immediately after he reprimands them for being too concerned with recognition, and not nearly concerned enough about extending welcome to others.

He says, don't throw parties for the people you'd expect. Don't spend your life chasing after social capital. Throw parties for the outsiders. Spend your life chasing after the poor, the sick, the outcast. Invite them in. Use your influence to bring others in. Don't worry about the status of your own invitation. There's room in God's house for us all.

Of course, this idea isn't original to Jesus. From the time of Abraham, the people of Israel have been reminded that they were wanderers and God brought them home. They were slaves and God set them free. They were lost in the desert and God made a way through. Care for the stranger, the widow, the weak, the outsider, is imbedded in the Jewish tradition. Jesus isn't teaching a new idea, he's encouraging these leaders to live up to the call of their faith in the face of a society that doesn't make that easy.



The other week, I was talking with a colleague about small group ministry. His church focuses on getting as many people as possible connected in a small group (like a Bible study or dinner group), and I was asking him what their policies were for adding new members to a group—are the groups open to anyone joining at any time? Is there a time at which the group becomes closed and no one new can join? And he said that while the groups tend to settle out after the first few weeks, the pastors ask the groups to always imagine that there is an empty chair in the room. The questions that they want the groups to constantly be asking is, “Who else can we invite? How can we use the feeling of belonging that we have in this group to welcome and give support to someone who may feel like an outsider? Who belongs in this empty seat?”

Our conversation got me thinking: what if we lived our lives like that—always imagining that there was an open seat? Always keeping an eye out for someone we could welcome in? Because we believe that there *is* enough room.

Is that the message *our* lives reflect?

It’s not easy to reflect God’s welcome when the social systems we’re part of make us feel like we have to work really hard in order to belong. It’s not easy to reflect God’s welcome when voices in our culture encourage us to exclude or ignore people who disagree with us. It’s not easy to reflect God’s welcome.

But the thing that I love about this parable is that even though the host began his dinner preparations in accordance with the social expectations of the day, by the end of the story, the dinner has taken on a life of its own. It wasn’t his initial plan to bring in people off the streets for the dinner, but the opportunity presents itself, and he realizes that it’s more important to get people to the dinner than to worry about their qualifications. It takes him a little while, but ultimately, he hosts a beautiful feast.

This is encouraging to me. I find myself so easily distracted by priorities that are not of the kingdom: acceptance, success, security. Maybe you have others. But the promise of this story is that even when our attention is focused elsewhere, the kingdom of God finds a way to break through. It may wreak some havoc on our social systems and personal relationships, it may undermine everything we’ve learned about how to get ahead, but even still, the dinner is ready now.

The kingdom of God is not like a party for people of influence. The kingdom of God isn’t even just like a party for the oppressed. The kingdom of God is like an exclusive invitation that gets turned on its head, a guest list that keeps growing, a house that still has room—room for everyone.

In just a minute, we’re going to close our time of worship with a hymn, *Come, Behold! the Feast of Heaven*. The hymn is an invitation, an invitation to the kingdom of God. As we sing, I hope that you will hear the words as though sung by the voice of God, to you. Be assured, there is room for you in the kingdom. And, as we sing, I hope that you will sing the words as an invitation—to your friends and neighbors, to strangers, even to those who make you feel uncomfortable—as an



invitation and an affirmation that in the kingdom of God there are no outsiders, because the dinner is ready, right now, and there is still room.

Amen.

